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Agonistic pluralism - the taming of political antagonism? Urs Marti

I will start with a short anecdote I've heard recently. A few days prior to the elections in Spain, a journalist asked a passer-by why he was planning to vote for Rajoy, the leader of the conservative party. The answer was: Because what he wants is good for Spain. Question: What does he want? Answer: I don't know and I assume Rajoy doesn't really know himself.

I think this anecdote reveals a lot about the state in which contemporary democracies are. Many people may still be willing to participate, to play the game of parliamentary democracy, but they do not have any convictions. Often they do not vote for a party and its programme, but against the previous party in power. However, they should know through experience that disappointment is unavoidable, no matter which party is in power. Actually, they do not even expect that things will change when persons or parties are replaced, that is, they do not hold other parties to offer serious alternatives. The parties, for their part, try to play the game of democratic competition. They disparage each other, in order to distract from the fact that their programmes hardly differ. Moreover they are permanently in trouble to decide whether they should go along with the needs of the voters or with the wishes of markets.

In describing these dilemmas of contemporary democracy or, as Colin Crouch would say: post-democracy, I agree with Chantal Mouffe's critical diagnosis. Democratic politics understood as the ability to freely choose between alternative social visions seems to be incompatible with the practical constraints of the global capitalist market economy. Politics amounts to nothing but the management of the social and economic adjustments, which are necessary to sustain competitiveness in the global market, as Robert Cox formulated 15 years ago. The "very idea of possible alternative to the existing order has been discredited" as Mouffe formulates. The "stabilization realized under the hegemony of neo-liberalism – with its very specific interpretation of what rights are important and non-negotiable – is practically unchallenged" (2000, 5). According to Mouffe, the task for democratic theorists and politicians should therefore be "to envisage the creation of a vibrant 'agonistic' public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted." But if politicians have no real choice and "if the participants in the discussion are not able to decide between clearly differentiated alternatives," the talk of 'dialogue' and 'deliberation' is meaningless (2005, 3).

However I have a few questions with regard to some further aspects of Mouffe's conception of agonistic democracy. My first question refers to her criticism of Rawls. Mouffe criticises Rawls's conception of a well-ordered society, because "it tends to erase the very place of the adversary, thereby expelling any legitimate opposition from the democratic public sphere." She continues: "On the political level a similar phenomenon is to be found in the case of the 'third way'" (2000, 14). I do

not see the similarity between the two positions. I assume Mouffe considers conceptions such as Rawls's reasonable pluralism or Habermas's rational, all-inclusive deliberation, as too idealistic and inadequate for describing real political situations. Even if we agree with this evaluation we should distinguish between the political projects of the advocates of the so-called third way, that is of people like Giddens, Blair, Clinton, Schröder or Beck on the one hand, and the philosophical conceptions of Rawls, Habermas, Cohen or Benhabib on the other.

In the first case we can indeed say that the idea of politics "beyond left and right" is misleading. Left and right still stand for different political projects in societies wherein the conflict of interests between economic actors such as capital owners and workers remains one of the big challenges with which democratic policies are confronted. Obviously the challenge has even grown in the neoliberal decades.

But the assertion that reasonable consensus is possible has no ideological implications. An at least minimal consensus is vital for a stable political order. I assume that modern democracies will be stable only if consensus is possible regarding the necessity of a legal order protecting some fundamental rights as well as to the procedures of political decision.

I think Mouffe is right in asserting that consent to principles of social justice is hardly conceivable in contemporary democracies. But I don't know how deep the dissent between her position and the position of Rawls really is. In "The democratic paradox" (2000, 25) she explains "What Rawls is really indicating […] is that there cannot be pluralism as far as the principles of the political association are concerned, and that conceptions which refuse the principles of liberalism are to be excluded. I have no quarrel with him on this issue."

In her book *On the political* she writes: "The pluralism that I advocate requires discriminating between demands which are to be accepted as part of the agonistic debate and those which are to be excluded. A democratic society cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries". It cannot allow "the coexistence of conflicting principles of legitimacy in its midst" (2005, 120-122). Even in *The return of the political* she stresses: "I agree with Rawls that a theory of justice in a modern democracy should be focused on the means whereby liberty and equality might be realized in our institutions" (1993/2005, 52). If these affinities are evident, why does Mouffe disagree with Rawls? A first reason seems to be pragmatic rather then normative. One should, as Mouffe explains, "take account of the fact that a new ideological terrain has been defined by the attacks of the right against state intervention […]. The shortcomings of Rawls on that count are all too evident since his theory of justice implies a great amount of state interventions" (1993/2005, 54). This objection could also be raised by advocates of the so-called third-way, and I suppose it isn't conclusive in Mouffe's argument. After all Mouffe concedes, that, "in the context of the aggressive reassertion of neoliberalism and its attacks against welfare rights and the widening of the field of equality, Rawls's intentions are commendable" (1993/2005, 53).

It is probably Mouffe's conception of the political that explains her disagreement with Rawls. "Rawls's 'well-ordered society' rests on the elimination of the very idea of the political" as she

explains in *The return of the political*. And she continues: "There is another way in which the political is absent in Rawls: the political understood as the symbolic ordering of social relations". What is a symbolic ordering of social relations? If principles such as liberty and equality are valuable for citizens of modern democracies, if they are "central signifiers" for them, then the reason is, according to Mouffe, "that these are the political principles of the liberal democratic regime". Citizens of modern democracies "have been constructed as subjects in a democratic society whose regime and tradition have put those values at the centre of social life" (1993/2005, 51f). If we are constructed or shaped by traditions then we are indeed not able to argue as free beings in a rational and reasonable way. But how can we then explain that we are able to disagree on the meaning of these concepts in an antagonistic manner?

My second disagreement concerns Mouffe's rejection of rationalism and individualism. Mouffe argues that both principles are unsuited to found a conception of the political. She discovered "entirely new perspectives for political action, which neither liberalism, with its idea of the individual who only pursues his or her own interest, nor Marxism, with its reduction of all subject positions to that of class," can imagine (1993/2005). I, however, would argue that rationalism and individualism are the shared theoretical foundations of modern liberalism as well as of Marxism. We shouldn't forget that Marx was a resolute critic of communitarian conceptions, that he mocked the "holy spirit of community" (MEW 4, 12). As he emphasizes, a class is not a community based on a strong communal spirit. The capitalist class as well as the working class are strategic associations of individuals who share some common interests because they have, as capitalists respectively as workers, similar tasks in the economic process. But at the same time, and in spite of his class-affiliation, every individual is permanently competing with every other individual. Although this situation is not easy to bear for the concerned individuals, Marx nevertheless attributes to capitalism the merit to have emancipated people. Only in the age of capitalism human beings are free to act as individuals (MEW 3, 54; 67). From this point of view, under conditions of rivalry there is no reason to discredit self-interest and rational behaviour. As it is well known, Marx denounces the anti-modernist and anti-liberal tendencies of socialist doctrines "preaching to the masses that they had nothing to gain, and everything to lose, by this bourgeois movement." Modern socialism presupposes "the existence of modern bourgeois society, with its corresponding economic conditions of existence, and the political constitution adapted thereto" (MEW 4, 487).

What I want to emphasize is the following point: Although Mouffe distances herself from some communitarian ideas she seems to share with Schmitt an anti-bourgeois and anti-modernist attitude. According to this attitude, rationalist and individualist theories are incompatible with an antagonistic political philosophy. But I think this is not true. As the theory of Marx proves, rationalism and antagonism do not contradict each other. Antagonism may result from a clash of different identities or we-communities. It, however, mainly results from the conflict between economic interests.

My third point concerns the concept of agonistic pluralism and the principles of liberty and equality. Like the advocates of 'political liberalism', Mouffe would like "to see the creation of a wide consensus around the principles of pluralist democracy." However such a consensus will not result from an arrangement between rational agents, but only by "creating strong forms of identification" with democratic institutions, by "developing and multiplying […] the discourses, the practices, the 'language games' that produce democratic 'subject positions'." Mouffe defines her project as an 'ethico-political' enterprise, "which does not deny the constitutive role of conflict and antagonism and the fact that division is irreducible" (1993/2005, 151) How could identification with democratic institutions, values or principles be possible? Liberty and equality, the main political principles of liberal democracy, "can be interpreted in many different ways and ranked according to different priorities" as Mouffe calls to mind (1993/2005, 150). Neoliberalism, the main adversary of the project of radical democracy that Mouffe supports, is just one interpretation.

In *The Democratic Paradox* Mouffe formulates a slightly different argument. It is, as she explains, "vital for democratic politics to understand that liberal democracy results from the articulation of two logics which are incompatible in the last instance and that there is no way in which they could be perfectly reconciled." Both logics tend to establish hegemony. However, as Mouffe realizes in 2000, it is only nowadays, "that the stabilization realized under the hegemony of neo-liberalism – with its very specific interpretation of what rights are important and non-negotiable – is practically unchallenged" and the very idea of an alternative to the existing order has disappeared (2000, 5). Is it possible for the radical democratic project to challenge the neoliberal hegemony? Mouffe would probably answer: Yes, under the condition that we do not look for consensus, but accept "an 'agonistic confrontation' between conflicting interpretations of the constitutive liberal-democratic values" (2000, 8f). But once again: What do we share as members of a polity, if we hold "conflicting" interpretations of the same values? How can we be sure that conflicts of interpretation do not undermine the stability of the polity? How can we tame antagonism and make it compatible with pluralist democracy, how can we transform it in agonism?

As Marx formulated: "No man combats freedom; at most he combats the freedom of others" (MEW 1, 51). Nobody combats freedom, but it's possible that he or she feels threatened by the freedom of his or her neighbour. He who understands liberty as negative freedom and she who understands it as positive freedom may well be members of the same polity. But I question that advocates of absolute private property and critics of the private ownership of big economic resources share a common symbolic space – confessing that I don't know what a common symbolic space is. Nobody combats equality; but which aspects of equality should be politically relevant criteria and which not? When denouncing the idea of social justice Friedrich von Hayek refers to the principle of equality, that is, the formally equal treatment of market actors. A conflict between a political party that demands equal distribution of some material resources and a political party that refuses such distribution is an antagonism, and I

don't see why the fact that the political actors involved share the same principles would allow one to call this agonism rather than antagonism as long as these actors interpret these principles differently. According to Schmitt, a constellation of enmity presupposes feelings of fundamental otherness and existential thread – it is possible that in modern capitalist societies property rights may have an existential meaning.

My last point refers to what I would like to call Mouffe's hesitant communitarianism and, once again, her Schmittian anti-modernism. It goes without saying that Mouffe distances herself from Schmitt in defending a pluralistic democratic order. Such an order "requires that, within the context of the political community, the opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated" (1993/2005, 4). In a more detailed way Mouffe proposes, in *The Democratic Paradox*, "to distinguish between two forms of antagonism, antagonism proper – which takes place between enemies, that is, persons who have no common symbolic space – and what I call 'agonism', which is a different mode of manifestation of antagonism because it involves a relation not between enemies but between 'adversaries', adversaries being defined in a paradoxical way as 'friendly enemies', that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way." The adversary is the protagonist of agonistic pluralism (2000, 13f). What exactly is the difference between adversaries and enemies? According to Mouffe it is the sharing or not sharing of common symbolic space. I've already confessed that I don't know what this term means. In a more dramatic but also precise way Schmitt speaks of the mortal enemy. A friend-enemy-relation is a matter of life and death – of course only in the extreme case, but it is only in the extreme case that the political arises.

However, as Mouffe emphasizes, the political shouldn't appear in its brute form. "Politics, as the attempt to domesticate the political, to keep at bay the forces of destruction and to establish order, always has to do with conflicts and antagonisms" (2000, 141). Consequently, politics should direct the initially destructive forces of the political in the peaceful course of agonism. But is it reasonable to reduce "the political" respectively "antagonism proper" to the destruction of people considered as enemies? Conflicts between economic actors with opposing interests can be quite antagonistic without being a matter of life and death. Antagonism concerns conceptions of the legal order, mainly of property rights, as well as the distribution of political and economic power. The transformation of constitutions, of systems of production and distribution may well have revolutionary traits, and indeed I think that the neoliberal politics of the last three decades have had revolutionary effects. Inescapably, by their adversaries radical political projects will be denounced as revolutionary, i.e. illegitimate. I do not fully understand Mouffe's position in this debate. She contrasts acts of radical refoundation and radical reforms (2005, 33), but what exactly is the difference between the two? Is not the question of what distinguishes them also a matter of disputed interpretation? If, as Mouffe seems to indicate,

revolutionary politics is nothing but a kind of Schmittian friend/enemy confrontation, then it inevitably provokes the "destruction of the political association." However, it is a matter of interpretation whether a political project causes the destruction of the political association or "a profound transformation of the existing power relations and the establishment of a new hegemony" (2005, 51f), as Mouffe defines the aim of the agonistic perspective.

To sum up, I have two objections to Mouffe's conception of agonistic or radical democratic politics. First, it neglects the economic dimension of power and the transformation of the economic order. When it refers to socialism then it presents it in an undetermined way as "a necessary component of the project of radical and plural democracy," as an indication of "the necessity of breaking with the universalistic and individualistic modes of thought" of liberalism or as a tradition which can "free political liberalism from the hindrances of universalism and individualism" (2000, 90; 99f).

My second objection once again refers to the anti-rationalism, anti-individualism and implicit communitarianism. In order to keep the emergence of antagonism at bay, Mouffe recommends strategies of identification, of the establishment of we-communities (2005, 16). Rationalist and individualist conceptions of politics completely miss the nature of "the political", that is: "the whole dimension of power and antagonism." According to Mouffe, "in the field of politics, it is groups and collective identities that we encounter, not isolated individuals, and its dynamics cannot be apprehended by reducing it to individual calculations" (2000, 140). She underlines the affective dimension of voting, the importance of sentiments and passions (2005, 25; 28f). If, as she claims, a new hegemony must be constructed, the building of such hegemony implies "a 'we' of the radical democratic forces. This can be done only by the determination of a 'they', the adversary that has to be defeated in order to make the new hegemony possible" (2005, 53). The aim should be "the political creation of a unity through common identification with a particular interpretation of its political principles, a specific understanding of citizenship." According to this conception, the task of political philosophy should be the offering of different interpretations of notions like justice, equality or liberty (1993/2005, 115).

Critical observers of contemporary democracy are sometimes tempted to say that citizens today have nothing but the right to express their dissatisfaction once in for or five years. In Mouffe's conception, they have – as a "we" – at least the right to emotional identification with "their own" group and to dissociation from adversaries, who share the same symbolic space, but not the same interpretations. But this we/they separation or confrontation is of no interest to radical politics as long as it is not clear which contents and projects may cause associations and dissociations.

Chantal Mouffe
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